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Interviews

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN DOWNEY ON COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA STUDIES¹

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Moment:

You have academic and administrative roles in different communication and media studies institutions. You

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⁴ ECREA, <https://ecrea.eu/page-18243>

currently also work as the president of ECREA. Please tell us your personal story and relationship with media and communication studies and your path to the ECREA presidency.

John Downey:

Okay, well, so I guess I started off my studies, studying economics. I wanted to be an economist and started studying economics at Cambridge University. But very quickly, I decided that this wasn't for me. And I switched subjects to social and political sciences. And that was in the mid-1980s. And as part of studying social and political sciences, I came across the work of the Frankfurt School like Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, and others. And also, Jürgen Habermas at that time as well. And, of course, part of their work was about the culture industry. This famous chapter in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where they talked about the authoritarian implications of popular culture. And I decided to do a PhD in that area. I was very fortunate that my professors at Cambridge were interested in that subject. And, that's why I decided to do my PhD. And so I did my PhD in the late 80s, early 90s, a long time ago. And then I did a postdoc at Siegen University in Germany. And at that time, they had a big German research grant on the history of television in Germany. And so I spent two years in Germany, which was very good. And then I got my first academic job in 1993. And taught comparative media or international media, which, and then I came to Loughborough in 2000. And at that time, comparative media was sort of really going through a sort of like a burst of interest. There was a very famous book by Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini called *Comparing Media Systems*.⁵ And, since then, comparative media analysis has really taken off, I would say. And I guess I'm part of that movement or development, but from a sort of always from a critical theory perspective. So, my work, I think, is still very much based around critical theory and the Frankfurt School. Even if not explicitly, then I think at least implicitly, it attempts to be critical and interdisciplinary. So it's in that sort of tradition of normative critical theory, but also trying to understand the place that communication plays in society. So, that's my background, I guess, I still see myself as really being a critical theorist at heart and trying to continue the Frankfurt School tradition.

Moment:

How about cultural studies tradition in Britain? It's very influential internationally, and also in Turkey. For example, our department has a very much British cultural studies orientation.

John Downey:

Well, so I remember as an undergraduate student reading Stuart Hall for the first time in the mid-1980s. He was an enormously influential figure. And of course, the whole of Birmingham, Birmingham School had a tremendous impact on the study of communication culture in the UK and in the rest of the world. It's an interesting question, I think, because there are different ways of doing cultural studies and different sources and different inspirations. So the Frankfurt School was clearly one source of inspiration, but also there was the

⁵ Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (Eds.). (2011). *Comparing media systems beyond the western world*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

influence of French theory, Roland Barthes, for example, and Michel de Certeau. And you know, also Gramsci was hugely influential in theories of hegemony and counter hegemony, and the study of everyday life, and the importance of understanding everyday life in the reproduction of inequality, and power. So yeah, the cultural studies tradition lives on strongly, I think in the UK in many, many different subjects. So it's not just in the field of communication, but that work is influential in sociology, as well, and adjacent disciplines. So, yeah.

Moment:

I wonder, what do you think about the position of critical theories and studies recently in the media and communication studies? I know it's a broad question, maybe we can specify that in Europe?

John Downey:

So it's an interesting question, I think, because there is a certain amount of disconnect, really, between the later generations of the Frankfurt School and, critical theory, and people in the field of communication. So Habermas is well known, but, you know, the work of Axel Honneth is not as well known, and Rainer Forst, not as well known. And I think it's a shame that their work isn't more influential in the field of communication. People tend to know and read Habermas and then stop, which I think is unfortunate, but still, there's a living tradition of critical theory, which isn't as widely known in our field as I think it could be.

It's also a little bit unfortunate that you know some of Habermas' work tends to be quite dismissive of new communication technologies, tends to see the internet and social media simply in terms of fragmentation and the decay of the public sphere, and, tends not to be that widely read in the field of communication. So there's a bit of a disconnect. So I read a very good article recently by Axel Bruns on the concept of public spheres.⁶ It was published in Communication Theory, I think, and he was actually sort of using the concept of public sphere and amending the concept of public sphere. So obviously, influenced by the tradition of critical theory, but he was also taking Habermas to task for not really acknowledging the great work that happens in the field of communication. Habermas tends to, I think, not necessarily understand the full intricacies of the field. So there is a bit of a disconnect between critical theory, which is sort of becoming more like political philosophy or emphasizing normative questions or theoretical questions, and more empirical work in the field of communication.

Moment:

You mentioned that you studied in the UK as well as in Germany. From your observations, are there any significant differences between the two countries in terms of communication scholarship and traditions of communication and media studies?

⁶ Bruns, A. (2023). "From "the" public sphere to a network of publics: towards an empirically founded model of contemporary public communication spaces". Communication Theory, Volume 33, Issue 2-3, 70-81. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtad007>

John Downey:

Yeah, so I think one of the fascinating things about European communication research is that it draws on quite different traditions of communication scholarship. So for example, in the UK, the cultural studies, the cultural studies tradition, is very prominent. And, you know, we do a lot of qualitative work, historical work, ethnographic work. Often the methods are more qualitative in orientation. In Germany, that goes on as well. But it's certainly not the dominant paradigm, I would say in Germany, you have a great deal sort of more quantitative empirical work. And might be, it might have more in common with sort of American or US traditions of mass communication research. And so they really draw on very, very different traditions. So if you read two journals in the field of communication, for example, a journal like the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, which draws very much on the cultural studies tradition. And then you would have a journal called *Political Communication* and those articles were very often drawing on quantitative and statistical approaches. And sometimes it's hard to think that they belong to the same field of communication, it is very large. And the traditions that it embraces are very clearly different from each other.

Moment:

I suppose that it's the right time to ask this question. You know, there is a long-standing debate about whether communication and media studies is a discipline, an interdisciplinary field, or simply an area of research. What are your thoughts about these debates?

John Downey:

Okay, so for me, it's clearly a field. And I think it's a field because we have lots of scholars from very different disciplinary backgrounds. They may be sociologists or psychologists or historians, or they may have a background in the study of literature. And they bring with them that disciplinary knowledge to try and understand and explain communication. So I think it's an inherently interdisciplinary field where people bring sort of their backgrounds, their different disciplinary backgrounds to bear on communication. I think one of the strengths of communication as a field is that we have lots of really brilliant and exciting interdisciplinary research. And I would say we don't really have too many sorts of settled paradigms of research. There's an opportunity for innovation and for bringing new methods from outside into the field.

I think if we started trying to make it into a discipline, and clearly some people do see it as a discipline and want to see it as a discipline. And part of being a discipline is to establish a theoretical canon, which undergraduate students need to understand when they're doing undergraduate courses and things like that, I think the danger of that is that we can become a little bit narrow. And we can potentially learn, both theoretically and methodologically from social science disciplines that we could use to understand communication. So the broader that if we can look outside the field, then there are lots of intellectual resources that we can use such as critical theory. But also, you know, comparative methods, for example, are

generally speaking, much more developed in other social sciences than they are in the field of communication still. So there are lots of interesting things happening beyond our field that I would encourage people to look at, and then try and import into the study of communication. And I think I've tried to do that somewhat in my career as I studied economics and then social and political sciences. So I had quite a broad disciplinary background before studying communication. So I've always had an interest in social theory, for example, and in social philosophy. And I think that helped me to analyse communication.

Moment:

As you said, communication and media studies is an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary field that utilizes social sciences methodology. What do you think about the position of communication studies in social sciences?

John Downey:

That's a very good question. So, I think it changes from country to country. So in the UK, for example, we have two funding bodies for the field, we have the Arts and Humanities Research Council and we have the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funds research in arts and humanities and the Economic and Social Research Council funds research in social science. And sometimes it's not clear where communication as a field sits, does it sit in the AHRC or the ESRC? So, you know, the breadth of the field means that we're in danger sometimes in the UK of losing out on research funding.

So also the prestige of the field. You know, there's not a course, for example, on communication at Oxford University or Cambridge University so it's not necessarily established as a field of study at elite institutions. But as yet, I think one of the tendencies is for communication to gradually sort of be taught at more prestigious institutions. It's a sort of a process. And it's partly to do with the almost normalisation of the field, I think in the 1970s when communication school courses started out, they tended to start out at former polytechnics in the UK. And the courses were often hugely oversubscribed, thousands and thousands of students wanted to study them. And also, there was very much a sort of like political dimension, or almost like an activist dimension to the study of communication. And this was very important in the cultural studies tradition as well. And I think since then, the study of communication cultures become sort of, in certain ways, more professionalised and more sort of normalised into a normal academic field, to a certain extent. And that is occurring in other countries as well. I'm not entirely certain, I know more about Germany and Italy and the United States. I haven't gotten encyclopaedic knowledge of everywhere in Europe. Probably I should have, but I don't. But that seems to be the trend. So, I would say communication is becoming institutionally stronger. And I think there's more of a widespread acceptance in society of the importance of studying communication as a field. I remember 30 years ago, when I first started studying the field, often, communication studies would be attacked as being

somehow a trivial subject to study. And it was the study of everyday life that was somehow trivial or not important. I think now very few people would actually consider the study of communication to be trivial or unimportant, it's clearly important. Social media, for example, has a huge significance in our everyday lives. I don't think anyone can doubt that now, so much so that really people from other fields start to study social media. So if you're an economist now, you might find yourself writing about social media, or political scientists write about social media. So, in a sense, our object of study has become widely acknowledged to be of crucial importance for contemporary society, so much so that many other disciplines are moving in on our territory.

Moment:

Another hot topic about communications studies, an age-long debate, is about the field's partly vocational and partly academic divided focus. For example, Pooley⁷ calls faculties of communication in the US "schizophrenic faculties" for this reason, as they provide partly academic, partly vocational education. What do you think about these debates?

John Downey:

Yeah, I think it's again, it's a very, it's quite an old subject now and there are many departments which are both theoretical and critical, but also more focused on media and communication practice, so that the practice of advertising or public relations or the production of videos or of photographs. And, there clearly is a danger of departments being split between people who teach theory and critique and people who teach practice. And, there's a danger in academics in the same department, being very much split between, not sharing a common ethos. And I think that's, you know, it may be, for example, practitioners see themselves as, that they see their job is producing professionals or students who could move into the world of professional practice very smoothly, and basically be able to imitate or reproduce the norms and conventions of professional practice easily, whereas often, the critical and theoretical scholars would see their job as encouraging students to critique those very practices. So there's undoubtedly a tension there. I think the best courses are ones where you find that there's more of a dialogue between the critical theoretical academics and the people who teach media practice. So that there's a development of common ethos around. And my basis for, you know, the way I try to bring both parts of the field together is really through the understanding of ethics. As I said, I very much belong to the critical theory approach and you know, the point of studying is to understand the world, but also we want to change the world and to make the world into a better place. Perhaps that sounds very idealistic. But that's what I believe. And ideally, my students would go out and change the world and make it a better place. And they can do that through their media practice, through their professional careers. So if they're making films or videos or taking photographs or engaging in professional practice, then they can make a contribution to

⁷ Pooley, J. (2008). The new history of mass communication research. In *The History of Media and Communication Research: Contested Memories*. Ed. David Park and Jefferson Pooley. New York: Peter Lang (pp. 43-70), p. 59

improving the condition of people in society. And they can only really do that through having a critical background, understanding what the basis for critique is. So, for me, that sort of critical approach is the bedrock, which can then be applied to the study of media practice. Without that critical bedrock, I think courses are in danger of simply trying to imitate what's happening in the professional world, but inevitably a little bit out of date, and, inevitably reproducing some of the inequalities and the discriminating practices that we find in media communication industries. So there is this tension between two sides of the field. But for me, I think the way to address it is through seeing critique as being at the bedrock, which then has implications for engaging in critical media practice.

Moment:

Maybe we can continue with ECREA's position, if you'd like to talk about what is ECREA's mission in communication and media studies, what do you think about it, could you tell us briefly about ECREA's activities in this field?

John Downey:

Okay, so I see ECREA as trying to provide a common European home for the study of communication and culture. It's an organisation that I hope is egalitarian in ethos, so we recognise that there are big differences and huge inequalities across Europe. And we hope to have an inclusive community that can promote the academic study of communication. So that would mean that we would hope to encourage scholars from areas of Europe that are sometimes considered to be peripheral. Turkey, for example, sometimes is often regarded as being a peripheral country to European organisations. Central and Eastern European countries are often thought to be somewhat peripheral to Europe. So the key thing I think is that we provide a sort of a forum for scholarly exchange between all scholars from all over Europe. And also, that we encourage, particularly exchanges between early career scholars. We have a large number of PhD students who present at our conferences, for example, and we also have an annual summer school. And we see that this is a really important function that we have. And yeah, we hope to promote the high standards of academic research. I'd also say that I would like to think of ECREA as really being quite open, theoretically and methodologically. So it may be that some other communication associations, I'm thinking particularly of the of the ICA⁸, for example. So I have a great many friends and colleagues who are involved in the ICA. And it's a hugely important global organisation for communication. But I think there's also a role for ECREA as well because I think sometimes the ICA can be quite dominated by North American scholars, and also perhaps dominated by scholars from a particular sort of tradition. Perhaps more, more quantitative traditions than the ECREA. So, I like to see ECREA being open to people with very different methodological and theoretical backgrounds. So it's the diversity. So, I see ECREA as really being at home to diverse scholars with diverse, you know, diverse ethnic backgrounds, and

⁸ The International Communication Association.

national backgrounds, but also diverse theoretical and methodological backgrounds. So that's ideally what I think ECREA should be or what it aspires to be.

Moment:

There is also the IAMCR⁹, among the international communication associations. But personally, I don't know much but I guess its influence has decreased in the past decades. I think it also has a European focus.

John Downey:

Yeah. So I think ECREA has grown as an organisation. So we now have around about three and a half thousand members drawn from mostly in Europe, but also we have members from other countries, and you don't have to be a citizen of a European country to join ECREA. And ECREA conferences now are relatively big. So, we have 500 people at a large conference. So ECREA is increasingly sort of like a major international communication association. And I don't really see it as being in competition with the ICA or the IAMCR. But, I would hope that, you know, there's a sort of a distinct, a distinct European identity in that our purpose is to sort of really promote European research, and that could be by scholars working in Europe, or scholars working about Europe. Having said that, we don't exclude. So if you want to present your research, if you're a scholar based in China or the United States of America, and you want to present a paper about something about communication happening in Africa, then you would also be welcome at conferences. So it's not exclusively European. It's, but the focus is in Europe. And it's one of its important aims is to encourage the dialogue between scholars based in Europe, about communication.

Moment:

Would you like to tell us about international communication policies after the McBride Report and UNESCO's press desk? What has changed after these things?

John Downey:

Well, quite a lot. The field of communication has changed so dramatically over the last two decades, I would say. So, when I first came to Loughborough, it was in 2001. And I was appointed to teach digital media. But this was in the days before *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and social media. You know, we were talking about, really, it was only in the sort of mid-90s onwards that the World Wide Web was becoming a sort of a more, more popular means of communication in Western Europe. So the whole sort of, you know, transformation of media systems since the McBride Report is you know, it's been a technological revolution.

As well as these discontinuities, there are also continuities as well, and the issue of power and inequality is still very much present. And talking about the power of corporations is still hugely important. It may be that

⁹ The International Association for Media and Communication Research.

those corporations might have changed their names. We might have some additionally powerful corporations such as *Apple* and *Microsoft* and *Amazon*, *Meta*, and things like that, in addition to some of the older communication organisations, communication corporations. We also still have the power of states as, and their influence on the communication environment. So, we could argue that what we've been seeing over the last couple of decades is the rise of illiberal forms of democracy in many parts of the world, including in Europe. You know, there used to be this idea of the end of history and the idea that we would live in sort of liberal capitalist democracies where there would be media based on liberal capitalist ideas. And I think what we're seeing in many different parts of the world, actually is the strength of state media, or if not state media, then state capture of media, of private sector media by reactionary political forces. So, you know, I would include Hungary, Russia, India, China, and also Turkey, to some extent. So I think this idea that, you know, we still have the inequalities of media power, either in the hands of relatively few corporations or in the hands of political elites is very important.

And of course, in addition to these political elites, there are also transnational flows of information. Obviously, the US is still very strong. But there are challenges, I think, to US dominance. So, you know, I think we're living in a world where the soft power of the United States is brought into question by the activities of China, Russia, and India. And they are producing very different narratives about what a good society looks like and whether the United States should be a sort of global hegemon, let's say. So huge, huge discontinuities in terms of the rise of new technologies and social media and different new forms of media. But also, some continuities in terms of state, or for capture of media, but also some realignment. And my view is that the United States is no longer as dominant as it was in the communication arena.

Moment:

Yeah, maybe speaking about recent developments and technological transformations, we can also talk about recent theoretical and methodological trends and paradigm shifts in communication studies, for example, big data and AI created a lot of hype. Also, we see more methodologies, utilizing quantitative text mining and big data methods. What do you think about these trends, orientations, or the future of communication and media studies?

John Downey:

That's a really important and interesting question. So earlier, you referred to sort of like one division in the field, which is between perhaps media practitioners or people who teach media practice and people who teach theory and criticism. Another split in the field, arguably, is between people who use qualitative methods and those that use quantitative methods. And that division is in danger of becoming even bigger, I think, because of what's called the computational turn in terms of social science methods and these big data and computational methods to understand communication. So topic modelling, for example, is a way of automatically analysing

large corpora, which would have been unimaginable in the past, because it would simply be too time-consuming to look at so many, so much data. And, that's possible now. And it's very enticing and attractive on the one hand, and I have to say, I'm fascinated by it, I'm attracted by it.

On the other hand, it also has some dangers associated with it, for example, as I said before, I see myself really, as a critical theorist, working in the area of comparative media. Now, comparative media analysis has become very popular in the last 20 years or so. But the implications for comparative media analysis of this computational turn aren't entirely clear. So say, for example, most computational work in the field tends to focus on English language texts, or if not English, then German. So it tends to be focused on one or two major languages, rather than taking a multilingual or polylingual approach. So there's potential for computational approaches to be multilingual and polylingual, but it hasn't really been realised as yet. And so there's a danger of that sort of computational turn, really cementing greater inequalities in the field. So that would, perhaps cement divisions between qualitative researchers and quantitative researchers. So, there are opportunities and, but also some risks, I think, and certainly, you know, what I hope to do in the future is to try and do some polylingual or multilingual computational analysis of texts. So, because I think this is an area that needs development or otherwise, comparisons just won't work, you know, the advances that we've made in terms of comparison just won't be extended, or they need to be extended to computational methods as well. That's why I hope to be doing in the next few years anyway, and try and work out a reasonable way of doing it.

Moment:

Maybe you know, we have a lot of communication faculties in Turkey. According to June 2023 data from The Council of Higher Education (CoHE), we have 68 communication faculties and many academics work in these faculties. We have a lot of graduate and undergraduate students every year. However, the institutionalization efforts and debates of the communication academy in Turkey have continued since the 1960s. What do you think about it? Do you have any information about the communication faculties in Turkey? How do you see Turkey's position in communication and media studies?

John Downey:

So, I have to say that I'm not an expert and should know more and would like to find out more, I have to say. And so my knowledge of Turkey tends to be mediated largely through Turkish scholars who are members of the ECREA and whom I know through ECREA. And certainly, many Turkish scholars have produced really very important work, both about Turkey, but also about communication in general. And many of the key subjects have a Turkish dimension. So I was reviewing an article recently about the growth of the precarity of journalists in Turkey, precarity, in terms of professional lives, and what the rise of social media means for journalism as a profession. Now, these are subjects which are, well, I was going to say they're universal, if they're not universal,

then they're certainly widely shared across national boundaries in, you know, and continental boundaries, as well. So there are certain things that are transnational in scope.

I also made reference earlier on to the rise of illiberal democracies in many countries, including Turkey, but certainly not restricted to Turkey. There are many cases in many different parts of the world. And one of the distinguishing features of the rise of illiberal democracy is this idea of media capture, where states or corporations working, sometimes with states or political elites, capture the media and use the media essentially as a means of propaganda. And also, states in these, in such countries, tend to have quite strong views on the role of universities and don't necessarily see universities as places of autonomous thought or academic freedom. And so in some countries, academic freedom is brought into question. And so, in a sense, there's a sort of like a twin danger of media industries being controlled by a relatively small number of corporations or by political elites.

But there's also the danger of academic departments being put under pressure by states or by political elites, and academic freedom can be under threat. And what to do in these circumstances? These are, you know, quite common circumstances, unfortunately, today in many different parts of Europe, and for many academics. You know, say, for example, ECREA has just issued a public statement about academics in Serbia, and where it appears that academic freedom has certainly been put in question. And I think part of the role of ECREA is to try support academics in such circumstances. So they can be critical, they can exercise their academic freedom, because I think, ultimately, this is what academics should do, and what the role of academics should do in society is that, you know, as I said before, my view of the academic world is that we should be not only trying to understand the world but to try to make it also a better place. And it's through, I think it's really through preserving academic freedom and fighting for academic freedom that we can actually do this. This is like a precondition for achieving this. So, I'd like to think that ECREA tries to support the exercise of academic freedom in Europe generally, and unfortunately, in many countries, including the UK, I certainly don't exclude the UK or the United Kingdom from this, is under threat and needs to be defended. So that's another function of ECREA, I think.

Moment:

Thank you very much. I think it's a very nice conclusion. Thank you for your insightful answers. Maybe, do you have anything to add or any thoughts?

John Downey:

No, I don't think so. Thank you very much for the questions. It was very nice to meet you. I hope to see you at an ECREA conference.